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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2657  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001103

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO  
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR HERRO MUSTAFA  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINISTERIAL STATEMENT 95 PERCENT  
COMPLETE, BUT DIFFICULT ISSUES REMAIN

REF: BEIRUT 1086

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Minister of State Nassib Lahoud, a member of the committee currently drafting the cabinet's ministerial statement, said the statement was "95 percent done." Hizballah's weapons remained the primary stumbling block, with the majority holding firm on keeping language that would acknowledge the state's exclusive right to decide when to use arms. Hizballah is resisting. Lahoud said the Aoun camp, represented on the committee by Telecom Minister and Aoun advisor and son-in-law Gebran Bassil, had thrown up new demands on Paris III and Palestinian refugees.

¶2. (C) The March 14 camp remained solid on the arms issue, despite suspicion that the recent violence in Tripoli is intended to put pressure on the majority. Lahoud reported that a Qatari envoy was expected to arrive in Beirut later that day to help mediate and, if there is no agreement, that President Sleiman was expected to provide a compromise text within the next few days. End summary.

HIZBALLAH ARMS REMAIN  
MAJOR STUMBLING BLOCK  
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¶3. (C) Charge Grant, accompanied by A/DCM, met with March 14 Minister of State Nassib Lahoud at his office on July 28. Hizballah's only issue with the draft cabinet statement is language on its arms, Lahoud reported, adding that the March 14 representatives had proposed many formulae, all of which included the need to preserve the rights of the state to wage war. March 14 reportedly had suggested using the language from President Sleiman's inaugural speech, then language stating the defense of Lebanon was the responsibility of the Lebanese state by all legal and available means, "including popular resistance," and finally proposed deferring discussion of the issue to the national dialogue.

¶4. (C) Hizballah rejected all of these options. It continues to insist on language stating that the resistance is a "natural right." Lahoud said this essentially would give Hizballah an "unlimited proxy to launch an attack against Israel," warning that Hizballah would then use its arms for any

issue it deemed worthy, including Sheba'a Farms or the issue of "tawteen" (Palestinian resettlement in Lebanon). Lahoud rejected Speaker Berri's so-called compromise, which included Hizballah's language plus a reference to UNSCR 1701, as "not enough."

¶5. (C) At the previous day's meeting, March 14 changed its approach, telling Hizballah that it knew what the majority needed in the statement (language on the state's monopoly on the use of weapons), so Hizballah should propose something. Lahoud said March 14 reps had made it clear to Hizballah that the majority was not trying to strip Hizballah of its arms in the short term. "We're willing to accommodate the de facto situation," he explained, as long as that state retains its rights.

¶6. (C) Hizballah MP Mohamad Raad, not a drafting committee member, made a threat to the majority in public remarks on Sunday, warning that any attempt to remove the word "resistance" from the statement would be considered an "act of war," in the same vein as the government's May 4 decision to dismantle Hizballah's fiber optic network. Lahoud called Raad's statement unacceptable, and asked him to withdraw his threat. Lahoud said President Sleiman, whom he met earlier in the day, also was "shocked" by Raad's statement. Inside the committee, Hizballah was more civilized, Lahoud added, referring to Labor Minister Mohamad Fneish.

AOUN CAMP THROWS  
UP NEW DEMANDS  
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¶7. (C) Lahoud explained Bassil's latest demand to revise the paragraph on Lebanon's Paris III commitments as an attempt to discredit the previous Siniora government, which had made those commitments, and provoke argument within the committee to demonstrate that Hizballah's arms was not the only contentious issue. "We spent four hours on this on Saturday, on something that should not be questioned!" Lahoud complained.

¶8. (C) Similarly, the Aoun campaign is seeking to insert language essentially "inciting" the Palestinian refugees to leave Lebanon, which Lahoud deemed to be bordering on racism. This was part of an Aounist anti-Sunni program to show that there was not just a Sunni-Shia problem in Lebanon, but also a Sunni-Christian problem. Lahoud suspected both tactics were posturing aimed at helping Aoun's Christians in the 2009 legislative elections.

MARCH 14 CAMP  
HOLDING FIRM  
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¶9. (C) Asked about recent sectarian violence in Tripoli, Lahoud said the "conventional wisdom" is that it was intended to put pressure on the drafting committee, with the threat of violence breaking out next in the Akkar region, north of Tripoli. For the time being, however, he confirmed that the negotiations remained professional, albeit "tough."

¶10. (C) Lahoud said that if the ministerial statement is not completed within 30 days of the government's formation, it would be considered resigned and a new government would be formed. However, he believed PM Siniora would remain solid. Lahoud cited Finance Minister Mohamad Chatah and Information Minister Tareq Mitri as "top class" in terms of supporting the majority's efforts to hold firm.

¶11. (C) Speaking of March 14 leaders who are represented in the drafting committee, he dubbed the March 14 Christians, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Kataeb (Phalange) leader Amine Gemayel and others, as "solid," and majority leader Saad Hariri as "reasonably solid" up until that point.

(Note: Saad, with whom Charge met immediately thereafter, was not in fighting mode, leaving us to wonder how solid he really is, septel. End note.)

¶12. (C) Lahoud was less sure of Druze Minister of State and MP Wael Abu Four, who reflects the views of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and who was exhibiting "flexibility." Jumblatt was trying to reach an accommodation with rival Druze leader Talal Arslan without disrupting his ties to the March 14 alliance, Lahoud explained, which risked causing problems with March 14 allies Geagea and Gemayel. However, this "accommodation" would not extend beyond the cabinet statement to including Arslan candidates on the 2009 lists, Lahoud stated confidently.

QATARIS AND/OR PRESIDENT  
SLEIMAN TO THE RESCUE?  
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¶13. (C) Lahoud said that Qatari Sheikh Jaber bin Youssef, Press Advisor to PM and FM Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, was traveling to Beirut July 28 to help mediate an agreement. He also believed President Sleiman would step in at some point soon with a compromise text, which he hoped (not sounding very confident) would not lean too far toward something the majority could not accept. Lahoud said he hoped instead Sleiman would "cut and paste" the language from his inaugural speech.

COMMENT  
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¶14. (C) Despite initial optimism, no one here really expected the negotiations to be easy, with Hizballah's arms the key bone of contention. The Aoun camp's efforts to throw up other obstacles is yet another indication that the opposition will continue to move the goalpost whenever it senses blood.

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This move also is at odds with the purported interest of Aoun's representative in the drafting committee, new Telecom Minister Gebran Bassil, in pursuing Paris III benchmarks such as telecom privatization, reftel. We hope that, if it comes down to Qatari or Sleiman intervention to resolve the impasse, these interlocutors will insist on their own language (the Doha agreement and inaugural speech) as the basis for any compromise. End comment.  
GRANT